

A PROJECT OF NEW WAYS MINISTRY

# Womanjourney Weavings

*An occasional forum for and about lesbian religious to exchange ideas, feelings, experiences, and events.*

## Prayers from the Closet

by Linda Taylor, CSJ

Sharing our stories about how we came to know we are lesbian and how we are working to integrate this aspect of our identity with the rest of our lives is one of the primary ways we will all grow in freedom and wholeness. For this reason, I want to share what I experienced a couple years ago, which was pivotal in my own coming out process.

I was sitting in my room one day, watching the sunshine pouring through the windows and feeling rather gloomy. I was thinking how I had lived in the closet as a lesbian for almost fifty years and how afraid I was of being out. I felt discouraged because I like being a sister and I like being lesbian, and I could not see how I could openly be both. It was not because I wanted to have a panner. It was because, somehow, it didn't seem as if a person is supposed to be a sister and a lesbian at the same time. I was afraid that being out as a lesbian would lead to my being out of the community, and I felt much pain over that possibility.

When I was younger, knowing I was lesbian had been a secret about the size of a penny inside my pocket. I would take the penny out and think about it once in a while, but mostly I was just as happy to leave it hidden in my pocket and to forget about it. I wanted to keep my lesbianism a secret, even from myself. I was afraid of people's reactions. Only after I met lesbian women who were happy and excited about being les-



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bian did my feelings begin to change. Gradually, my penny became as large as a Susan B. Anthony dollar and, in time, filled every nook and cranny of my thoughts and feelings. There weren't pockets enough to hold it! At this time in my life I came to a turning point.

As I sat in my room, I thought about going into my bedroom closet and praying. Why not pray in that small closet with two louvered french doors since that was where I was living? Wondering how it would feel to go inside, I squeezed myself into the closet and closed the doors in front of me. It was like closing elevator doors, but the elevator had no light inside.

At first, I was mostly aware of how dark and crowded it was. There was so little space I had to turn my feet sideways and push the clothes back to make enough room for me. I put my hands on the door jams to brace myself and keep my balance. As I got used to the push of the clothes and the way I was standing, I began to notice little cracks of light showing through the louvers in the doors. As I looked through the louvers into my room, I could see light flooding my room. I thought, "Why am I here in the dark when I could be out enjoying the sunshine?" I imagined one of the sisters in the house saying through the louvers, "Linda, what are you doing in there? Come on out!"

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# Always Our Sisters

by Kate Reid, ASC

To our homosexual brothers and sisters... we stretch out our hands and invite you to do the same... We need one another if we are to "...grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Though at times you may feel discouraged, hurt, or angry, do not walk away from your families, from the Christian community, from all those who love you. In you God's love is revealed. You are always our children.

— Conclusion of Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children & Suggestions to Pastoral Ministers, A Statement of the Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997



Forty-two women religious, representing twenty-three different congregations, gathered in December 2005 to participate in a conference entitled Lesbian Religious: Continuing the Conversation. It was the largest gathering of lesbian religious to date, and the first time congregational leaders and vocation/formation personnel were invited to learn about issues affecting sisters who are lesbian.

The Leadership Team has been concerned about what we perceive in our Church and society to be a climate of escalating suspicion and hostility toward lesbians and gays who are our sisters, brothers and collaborators in Church ministry. We are particularly concerned about how such a negative climate may be impacting the well-being of lesbian Adorers. We observe that people of good will who are uninformed and misinformed about homosexuality can make life very difficult for gays and lesbians. We do not want that to be the case among us. So, as a representative of our Leadership

Team, I went to Continuing the Conversation eager to learn what we can do to support our lesbian sisters.

I knew that sexuality is about much more than sex; it is energy for relationships. I learned that heterosexual persons need the company of persons of the opposite gender. They draw vital energy from healthy interactions with them in marriage and family settings, in social settings and in the workplace. Similarly, homosexual persons prefer the company of their own gender for a whole range of social, relational activities. To be a lesbian is to be a woman who needs the company of women—their collaboration, support, understanding, affection, care—and the vital energy that companionship gives them.

One would think, therefore, that a community of women religious would be an environment in which lesbian sisters give and receive a great deal of positive energy. However, I learned that if most sisters fear homosexuals because they know and understand so little about homosexu-

ality, then lesbian sisters feel it is unsafe to be open about their orientation. They feel they must hide the truth of who they are. Such hiding dissipates the positive relational energy they might otherwise experience if they did not feel compelled to stay "in the closet" in order to be accepted by their sisters.

I learned that all of us need to support each other in fostering an environment that is free of the ignorance and animosity generated and perpetuated by heterosexism. Heterosexism is the irrational hatred, fear and disgust directed towards lesbians and gays. It is based in a belief system that asserts that heterosexuality is normal and superior and homosexuality is deviant, abnormal, a crime or a sin.

I learned that lesbian sisters fear that if they openly identify themselves as lesbian, then their sisters in community will misjudge their friendships with women as being sexually active relationships. Lesbian religious fear sisters will distrust their sisterly acts of affection; i.e. any

hug will be seen as a “come on.” They fear that we, their sisters, will not believe that they are committed to the same celibate chastity that all of us vow.

Lesbian sisters participating in the Conversation shared what they want and need from their religious communities and from community leaders. They need our openness to a diversity of sexuality among us. It is important that we understand that while homosexuality is not the norm (not typical of the majority), it is not abnormal. It is simply a relational orientation that a woman gradually recognizes in herself. Some realize it in their teens; most take longer to name and accept their orientation—to “come out to themselves.” Given the hostile attitudes and negative stereotypes of lesbians and gays, it takes much courage for a woman to admit that she is lesbian.

In a social/political climate that often regards gays and lesbians as mistakes of nature—even when there is abundant data to enlighten us otherwise—a lesbian needs the love and acceptance of others who truly know her. She needs to live in an environment where it is safe for her to identify herself as a lesbian should she want to share this with others. If she hears remarks that indicate a prejudice against lesbians and gays and indifference to issues related to their human and civil rights, a lesbian sister will feel that she must hide her sexual orientation in order to be safe from suspicion and resentment. However, if we can cultivate a community climate in which we respectfully acknowledge and accept sexual diversity, then all of us can thrive. Lesbian sisters

can trust that they will not be shunned if they choose to disclose their sexual orientation. Heterosexual sisters, likewise, can set aside the bonds of heterosexism and be free to know and cherish their lesbian sisters as women who bless others with their God-given gifts of nature and grace.

The women at the conference asked leadership to break the silence about lesbian religious and to offer education to dispel stereotypes and misinformation. They asked leadership to take steps to create a community climate in which it is safe to be known as a lesbian. This article is our effort to both break the silence and let in some light. We are offering the enclosed pastoral message from U.S. Bishops, *Always Our Children*, as a resource for our continuing education and as a tool to generate conversations that will “break the silence” among us.

I learned of other resources, as well. Womanjourney Weav-



To be a lesbian is to be a woman who needs the company of women — their collaboration, support, understanding, affection, care — and the vital energy that companionship gives them.

ings is a publication for lesbian sisters. If you would like to be on their mailing list send your name and address to Womanjourney Weavings, 4012 29<sup>th</sup> Street, Mt. Rainier, MD 20712. Two books that come highly recommended are *A Challenge to Love—Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church*, edited by Robert Nugent and *Beyond Acceptance—Parents of Lesbians & Gays Talk About Their Experiences* by Griffin, Wirth and Wirth.

If you have questions about the Leadership Team’s decision to take up the challenge to “break the silence,” please invite me to join your conversations. If I can direct you to additional resources, please contact me; if I do not know, I know who to ask.

This article is also to be read as Leadership’s outstretched hands to our lesbian sisters. We are all Adorers of the Blood of Christ, women who believe in the power of the Precious Blood to break down the walls that divide us. We need your help if we Adorers are to cultivate a climate in which the Blood of Christ can free us to be the women God wants us to be—good for ourselves, good for each other, good for God’s people.

— Sister Kate Reid

*This article was originally published in Gleanings, April 2006, a publication for the members of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ. Sr. Kate served on the leadership team of her congregation. She has been a member of the Adorers since 1965 and lives in St. Louis, MO, where she is currently a legal advocate for immigrants and refugees. ▼*



# Sacrament and Prophet

by Sharon Casey, op

On March 17, 2007, I spoke at the New Ways Ministry symposium, whose theme was "Outward Signs: Lesbian/Gay Catholics in a Sacramental Church." My reflections led me to realize that we lesbian religious are called to be both sacrament and prophet. We are sacraments or outward signs of witness to the church and world and we are prophets who are called to speak our truth.

I didn't fully understand what Jesus meant by saying, "And the truth shall set you free," until I was able to come out to myself, to accept myself fully and honestly, and to say out loud the words, "I am a lesbian." In that moment I felt truly free and have never looked back these past fourteen years.

When I came out at age 53, I didn't want to lose any more time; so I wrote a letter to my entire community, telling them my story. I didn't know what response to ex-

pect; it really didn't matter as I just wanted to speak my truth. The outpouring of love and support from my community was overwhelming. I am blessed to belong to a group that is so accepting and that affirms a commitment to Gospel Truth. As the years of witness have passed and the surprise or shock has worn off, folks do have questions and speculations, but at least the conversation has begun.

For many of us, even talking about sexuality generates uncomfortable feelings. While we have workshops and speakers about justice issues, transition issues, and aging issues, workshops on sexuality, let alone sexual orientation, are few and far between. This makes it difficult for women religious to speak their truth and witness because we aren't sure how this knowledge will be received. Will people assume the sister is promiscuous and violating her vow

of chastity? The unknown creates fear and silence.

Witnessing and speaking one's truth require support. One of

my greatest supports has been the Bay Area Lesbian Religious group in California. As I prepare to leave my present ministry and return to the Northwest, I am grateful that lesbian sisters in the Northwest have begun to come together to share, support, and nourish each other.

Some of us are able to be out fully; others less so. In whatever ways we can share our story with others, each of us is called to be both a sacrament of witness and a prophet of speaking one's truth. ▼



## Out of Silence God Has Called Me



Janet Rozzano, RSM

## Out of Silence God Has Called Me

A Lesbian Religious Reflects on Her Experience

by Sister Janet Rozzano, RSM

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# RAISING THE ISSUE

by Michele Morek, OSU

The fresh breezes blowing off the wintry surface of Lake Michigan were an apt symbol of the transformative experiences taking place inside the Racine Dominicans' retreat center. We had gathered that December weekend—community leaders, formation directors, vocation ministers, and lesbian members of communities of women religious—not knowing what to expect. Having a family member who is gay, I considered myself a “liberated thinker” on the subject of gay and lesbian persons, but I soon discovered that this was exactly why I needed to be there—I was only a liberated thinker.

As an embryologist and reproductive biologist I certainly was comfortable with the idea that physical, psychological, and social sexual development is a continuum between the two extremes of male and female, but I soon realized with a shock that I had never actually sat down with anyone with a homosexual orientation, to ask them how it felt. Nor had I ever questioned what the journey of discovering herself to be lesbian might be like for a woman religious, or what her pastoral needs might be.

The high point of the weekend for me was the panel of four women: two of them were younger and had entered religious life knowing they were lesbian, while the other two had discovered that part of who they are only after being in religious community for a number of years. The open sharing of those women made the rest of us comfortable in dialoging with other participants over that weekend.

We discussed ways to deal with homophobia in our communities, and ways to provide for our sisters who have a homosexual orientation a safe place within their own religious communities—a safe place where they can come to an understanding about themselves, and share that understanding as it becomes relevant in community situations. It would be very surprising if we did not have any lesbian sisters in our communities already, considering that one out of every ten persons in the general population has a homosexual orientation, and an even higher estimated percentage in religious life. Just on the basis of statistics we should assume we have had and do have sisters who are lesbian, even

if they never were free to think about it themselves, or to share it with others. Few of the liberated women at the conference had shared their orientation with their whole community. Generally they had “come out” only as rel-

evant and appropriate (e.g., in the formation process or with close friends).

The official stance of the Catholic Church is that lesbian/gay persons “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity [and] every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided” (Catechism of the Catholic Church). I hope that would describe our communities—but does it? I think some of us might fear the idea of lesbian sisters; I think some members' reaction would be anger if “somebody let them in.” We may not be healed from the sins of homophobia (fear of homosexuality) or from heterosexism (perceiving the world through our heterosexual lens, and thereby determining what is “normal”), sins as bad as racism and sexism, but more “socially acceptable” for some.

We are all at different stages in our ability to talk about this topic, and our sisters may find talking about this hard, shocking, or embarrassing. But we need to raise the issue, and at least begin to claim our homophobia, if it exists in us. This is very much like many religious orders who made public apologies to African American people, for having been slave owners.

Homosexuality is not a disease, vice, or habit that can be broken. Rather it is “an existent charac-



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# What Does It Matter If You Are Lesbian When You Are Celibate?

by Fran Fasolka, IHM

Upon my arrival home from a retreat for lesbian religious, there was an e-mail message from a straight secular friend. Earlier I had told her I was making this retreat. In response, she asked, "What does it matter if you are lesbian when you are celibate?"

Prior to making this retreat, I may have given that question some thought, or at least, I would have struggled to explain my feelings. While at Rockhaven, I knew it mattered—it mattered a lot! Several days into the retreat, I became painfully aware of my need to be with women who are lesbian and religious. The emptiness within me that has been created by distance and silence cried out for connection and nourishment.

I wish I could share here the depth and beauty of my experience at Rockhaven. Another world was created by our common experience and unfolding understanding of what it means to love women and at the same time be committed to living celibately.



Quiet moments, gazing into the dense foliage that lined the muddy river beyond the retreat house, allowed me to review my friendships. I have really good friends. Many are straight, far less are lesbian, and I wish more were lesbian and religious.

Uncovering my feelings surrounding these relationships, I found myself teetering between intense joy at the companionship I had experienced with my lesbian sisters at this retreat and disappointment at the thought of returning home to a community I love dearly, but in which are hidden at

least a few lesbians who choose to remain silent and unknown.

I wish my sisters could know how much I need them and how much we need each other for support and companionship in this religious life journey that seems so difficult and lonely at times. I realized then how difficult it has been to stand alone and how much I need their support for my celibate commitment.

After seven glorious retreat days, refreshed and energized, I returned home. I am confident that I will come to know other sisters in my community who embrace and honor themselves as lesbian. My hope is that we can provide each other the support necessary to live fully and faithfully our religious life—as lesbians.

I promise to wait with open arms for my lesbian sisters.

When *you* come to love the lesbian part of yourself, know that I am waiting to share your joy. ▼

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I stood with hangers poking me in the back and clothes crowding around me. I felt a profound sadness. My efforts to avoid everything that could identify me as lesbian had led me to be only half known by all but a few people in my life. I thought about the gay and lesbian people I knew who were out and who were risking everything to be themselves. I wanted with all my heart to be like them. I thought, "I don't want to

die in the closet."

Praying in the closet that day was the beginning of a steady resolve to take steps to live out and to find ways to integrate being lesbian with being in a religious community. I began to do things that would help me get to know other lesbian and gay people and to participate in social, spiritual, and political activities with them. At first, it took a lot of courage to go places, to introduce myself

with my entire name, and sometimes to share that I am a sister.

I am gradually taking the risks involved in integrating my life. As I consider all that my life now holds because of the steps I have taken since literally coming out of my bedroom closet, I know I am experiencing a contentment and enthusiasm about life that I have never before known. ▼



# Coming Home at Last

by Laura Bregar, OSU

As lesbian religious, don't we all wonder if we'll find a house filled with love to take us in? Can we be women-loving-women and continue to call the Church our home? Is it possible to live surrounded by women on those days when every atom in our bodies is soaring with desire, hurdling longingly toward consummation? Can we honestly embrace chastity while we hide our orientation in the community from whom we seek both comfort and challenge?

I have asked these questions for years, often likening the internal struggle to Jacob's battle with the angel on the riverbank. Feeling alive has almost always meant engaging actively in the tension of that tussle. What I have come to discover is that the queries have grown out of a complicated dynamic that has only begun to make sense to me. How surprised I have been to experience a breather in the match by the river as I have recognized the relationship inherent in my vocation and sexual identity questions!

Unlike most of my friends in community I have always been troubled deeply by my decision to remain an Ursuline year after year. I have kept waiting for the day when I would finally make the break and seek my life elsewhere. Something has happened in the last year that has vitally altered that stance. There is finally profound peace in my commitment, a hard-won serenity coming twenty



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years after my entrance in 1976. It wasn't until I honestly claimed my identity as a lesbian that I was able to claim my call to religious life with an undivided heart.

First, however, new questions arose as I began tentatively to explore the possibility that I might be "one of those people." In honest, human terms: How could I be a lesbian and deal with my lusts and loves chastely when I saw women all around me - attractive, bright, engaging women? And who would even understand and accept all this in our Church, in my community, in my circle of friends?

The more I accepted, embraced and reveled in God's wondrous creation of me as a woman-loving-woman, the more integrated these questions became a healthy part of my self-understanding. In fact, in some ways they have grown into a stronger core, a spirit within, drawing deeply of the God who speaks to me, "You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased." If God delights in me, then dare I do less? What better way to return that divine affection than to live more rooted in the religious life that has captured my heart since I was a foolish teenager and imagined myself one among the number of Ursulines that I adored? True, some of that adoration was unrecognized sexual longing, but God entices us with her creation in whatever ways she knows will call us forth.

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# Welcome Home

by Sister Charlene Diorka, SSJ

Welcome Home! What a commonly heard expression! Because my ministry as the associate director of the National Religious Vocation Conference involves a good deal of travel, I have grown accustomed to this greeting. It wasn't until I attended the gathering of New Ways Ministry in Racine, Wisconsin entitled "Lesbian Sisters: Understanding, Education, and Action" that I began to understand these words in a deeper way. I pondered what the words "Welcome Home" might mean to our lesbian sisters. I asked myself how we help our lesbian sisters to feel welcomed and at home in community. And I began to explore a hallmark of many religious charisms: hospitality, and its significance for our lesbian sisters.

For me the word "welcome" denotes a reception that is offered willingly, gladly, eagerly, freely and with delight. The word "home" conjures up ideas like belonging, dwelling place, native, and place of origin. These very same words accurately described my experience at the weekend gathering in Racine. I felt both welcomed and at home in our times of praying, storytelling, processing, and socializing. Indeed, I had received a valuable gift. I began to consider then how I and even our communities could use this gift in return with our lesbian sisters who seek our acceptance, support, and companionship.

I realized as the conference unfolded that these words were



*A common thread among those who shared their story was the theme of coming to know oneself truly for who one is, recovering the "lost" piece of oneself, or struggling to own the self that was emerging.*

truly at the heart of the presentations that I heard. A common thread among those who shared their story was the theme of coming to know oneself truly for who one is, recovering the "lost" piece of oneself, or struggling to own the self that was emerging. I heard the cost of what it is like for someone to "come home" and "come out" to oneself and especially to others. To make this journey requires courage, honesty, and grace. I also heard the pain and suffering felt when one cannot share the truth of who she is and lives in silence, in the darkness of being closeted and closed off. The idea of coming home began to resonate even more.

The challenge then is for us as community to be that welcoming presence that can support one's homecoming. As sisters to these lesbian women, I heard that providing a safe and loving environment for a lesbian sister could make all the difference in supporting her desire to be known and accepted rather than hidden and invisible. I heard that our ability to talk openly and honestly about sexuality could support the integration of a lesbian sister's orientation not to mention our own. It helps all of us to name and claim our sexuality so that we do not assume an asexual attitude or imply that everyone is heterosexual. I heard that without an open, welcoming environment, we could mistakenly encourage hurtful stereotypes and misconcep-

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tions about our lesbian sisters. An educated and committed community can make all the difference in providing a welcome home for our lesbian sisters to be the persons God has called them to be.

So many of our diverse community charisms claim hospitality as a call to extend warmth, kindness, and generosity in living our mission. For me this provides the most concrete step in meeting our lesbian sisters in community. It is to talk, live, and minister with them precisely because of who they are rather than who they are not. It is to recognize that my lesbian sister is similar to me in all things except for the fact that she is lesbian. One of the most powerful things that I heard acknowledges that, "Lesbian nuns experience the same needs for love, touch, and affection as heterosexual nuns. They treasure deep friendships with heterosexual sisters with whom they are not

romantically involved. They struggle, as all nuns do, to free their relationships from suffocating domination, control, and exclusivity. Some have a primary relationship with another woman with whom they may or may not live; others do not feel they have a primary relationship."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I believe that a significant aspect of the hospitality that I demonstrate needs to be offered consistently, genuinely, and freely to my lesbian sisters. When this is the case, then one of the most distressing things that I heard regarding lesbian sisters being the most silent and hidden subgroup in the gay and lesbian Catholic community might gradually disappear. Then we might also be able to see this as the important issue it is for us as women religious. Perhaps the illusion that there are no lesbian sisters or very few among us will eventually be dispelled.

As a Sister of Saint Joseph, our mission calls me to a profound love of God and neighbor without distinction. My experience at the gathering in Racine reminded me that my "dear neighbor" is not always out there in the world in which I minister, but often my neighbor, literally next door to me in community. I am grateful for this opportunity to renew my awareness and commitment to work towards that kind of loving presence. I pray that one day, we all may be one.

<sup>1</sup> Gramick, Jeannine, "Lesbian Nuns: Identity, Affirmation and Gender Differences," *Homosexuality in the Priesthood and Religious Life*, 1989.

*Charlene Diorka is a Sister of Saint Joseph of Philadelphia and currently serves as the Director of Formation for her congregation. ▼*

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If anyone had told me twenty years ago that being a lesbian was part of my attraction to religious life, I would have laughed, both frightened and skeptical. Today I still chuckle at the image, but with understanding and recognition. Yes, it's hard to live with the lust that sometimes threatens to overwhelm me when I am intrigued by a woman in community. However, a deeper desire to be one with God reminds me that any human union must always fall far short of my lusting imagination. Celibacy is difficult, but it is a sumptuous gift like hunger pangs before a banquet.

I have been richly blessed with companions who have respected my puzzled wrestling. They have endured my calling out in the midst of the nightmares that have plagued me. Patiently, they have withstood my anger at those in the Church who refuse to grant me harbor, clamoring for change with me, or at times, soothing my unbridled and misplaced rage. Words cannot contain their abiding love for me or my brimming gratitude for them. That these friends know who I am and stay by the river's edge with me is enough at this moment in my life.

I imagine the day will come when I will want to challenge my congregation with my presence as a lesbian who is deeply committed to the call of religious life. For now I need to live awhile with the peace of heart that has resulted from the hard-won battle to know myself as a lesbian and an Ursuline. Twenty years of wrestling has been exhilarating and exhausting. This respite of calm is an unexpected and welcomed grace. ▼

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teristic, like having red hair or being left-handed, which persons do not choose and cannot change...” (Homosexuality: a Positive Catholic Perspective). The causes of our sexual orientation aren’t absolutely known, but it is probably established in early childhood by multiple biological, sociological, and psychological factors. Certainly this marks a definite advancement from earlier theories; for example, a popular booklet in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century claimed that homosexuality was caused by the drinking of English tea and the pernicious influence of Italian opera!

A lesbian woman religious is called to keep the same vow of chastity as her heterosexual sisters. So why should she want to find out she is lesbian, let alone to make it known? One participant at the conference said “we work all our lives to become integrated, and it hurts to have to ignore or to hide part of yourself ...when you deny it you never feel whole.” What a shame that many of these women have to go outside of their religious community to be open about that part of themselves! But the lesbian sisters there experienced a great sense of inner freedom and energy once they discovered who they were. It takes a tremendous amount of energy to keep secrets.

I asked some of the women how they had come to know they were homosexual. They turned the question around on me and asked how I knew I was heterosexual! “Well, uh, I guess it’s something that adds up over a period of time... like whether I fall in love with Paul Newman or Jane Fonda?” Most of my answers were simplistic because I had never thought about it... after all, heterosexuality is the “norm” and if you are in the norm you don’t

think about it. When do you know? One of the most touching experiences of the conference for me was when a tiny, quiet, grey-haired woman in her 70s stood and told us that we were the first to know that she had just discovered she is lesbian. Young women entering religious life today are more likely to have addressed these issues than we who did our “growing up” in religious life. The young lesbian sisters who spoke at the conference described very different experiences than the older sisters who had discovered their sexuality later in life.

Returning to my earlier question, I ask, “What would it take to address homophobia in our communities?” As someone said of racism, “Don’t ask if it exists in your community—assume it does and ask how you deal with it.” Maybe just being alert to how we think and feel, act and react, would be a start. In *Human Sexuality* (1991) the U.S. bishops affirmed that “homosexuality cannot and ought not to be skirted or ignored.” Bishop Thomas Gumbleton says that we can’t in justice be silent in the face of homophobia. The psychologists at the conference said that homophobia is rooted in a fear of differences, and usually indicates that the one who is afraid has never embraced her own sexuality. The answer is education, education, education.

The annual conference at Racine is a good place to start your personal or community education, and I recommend it to any community leader, formation director or vocation director. ▼

*Sister Michele Morek served as the congregational leader of the Ursuline Sisters in Maple Mount, KY until 2010. She is currently the coordinator of Unanima International, an NGO at the United Nations.*

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# SISTERS AND INSTITUTIONAL AGENDAS

by Jeannine Gramick, SL

As I sit with my cup of hot tea on my desk and my special needs cat, Rosie, at my feet, I am reflecting on the topics of conversation in Catholic circles today. I feel pleased that the issue of homosexuality now has a place on the institutional Church's agenda, and gratified to think that New Ways Ministry has contributed to this state of affairs.

In particular, I am mulling over the New Ways Ministry conference for lesbian religious, congregational leaders, and vocation/formation ministers that was held outside of Oakland, California, in February 2010. At the conference, Mary Ann Zollmann BVM, President of the Sisters of Charity BVM, shared some remarks from her outgoing presidential address at the 2003 LCWR Assembly.

She described the feeling of homelessness of gay and lesbian Catholics who "live compassionately, justly yearning for a return of compassion and justice on the part of a church they love." Mary Ann spoke of "men and women whose passion for wholeness in relationship is lived in deep commitment to life-long same-sex partners." She depicted "their struggle to find a home in our church," and shared that she "felt the ache of my own homelessness in the church that is my home."

New Ways Ministry has been educating congregational leaders like Mary Ann Zollmann for more than three decades, and I like to think this education is coming to fruition. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, New Ways Ministry staff contributed articles about homosexuality and religious life to publications of Catholic organizations such as the National Assembly of Women Religious, the National Sisters Vocation Conference, the Religious



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WAYS MINISTRY HAS  
CONTRIBUTED TO THIS  
STATE OF AFFAIRS.

Formation Conference, and the National Conference of Religious Vocation Directors. Through major symposiums and educational workshops in motherhouses of women religious across the U.S., New Ways Ministry has reached countless teams of women religious leaders. I believe this education has filtered up to diocesan structures.

After the painful ordeal that Fr. Robert Nugent and I endured following the 1999 Vatican notification that we should discontinue lesbian/gay ministry, many LCWR teams decided to engage their local bishops in conversations about homosexuality. Mary Ann described one such meeting, where the conversation included a discussion of the church's position on homosexuality. As some appealed to an ethic based on natural law, alleging that homosexuality was intrinsically disordered, Mary Ann spoke on behalf of lesbian

and gay persons, telling the story of the beauty of their relationships and offering an alternative ethic of sexuality. It is through the courageous speech of caring leaders such as Mary Ann Zollman that those in church structures are beginning to hear the voice of the voiceless.

As I finish my cup of tea and Rosie yawns a "ho-hum," I remonstrate, "Rosie, this is not a 'ho-hum' matter. I'm delighted that lesbian sisters are meeting with congregational leaders. And I feel good about New Ways Ministry's role in educating our Church's middle management about homosexuality." Rosie mews. I interpret this as assent. ▼

*Sister Jeannine co-founded New Ways Ministry in 1977. Her work is documented in the film, "In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith."*